

## Science of the Surf: The development and evaluation of a national campaign to reduce the risk of coastal drowning

Australians love beaches. Beaches are one of our greatest natural resources, and we have a lot of them; over 10,000 in fact. It is often a surprise then that the thing we love can also be dangerous. Statistics from the Surf Life Saving Association show that between 1999 and 2004 there were an average of 58 drowning deaths each year at Australian beaches, mostly in NSW and Queensland. International tourists account for between 10 and 30 percent of drowning deaths each year. In addition, we know that there are countless 'near misses'. Life savers perform more than 9,000 rescues and do first aid on more than 26,000 people each year. While most people will completely recover from their experience of near-drowning; around one-quarter have some lasting problem.

The aim of this research project is to find out why these drowning tragedies happen and attempt to do more to prevent them. Clearly to prevent beach drowning we need to do more to help swimmers make good assessments of when and where to swim. We will develop an information campaign to give people a better understanding of beach and surf hazards, to help them understand *why* beach safety is important and to give them some better information on beach safety that is designed for their needs.

We know that if people are to adopt safe behaviour of any kind, they need to understand what they can do to protect themselves. This educational initiative will provide people with the basic knowledge about beach safety that is essential for them to make decisions about when and where to swim. The issue is what kind of information will be most useful and effective? What do people need to know and what are the best ways of getting this information to them in a form that they can easily understand?

The research will involve interviewing people on beaches about their attitudes and knowledge of beach safety and will observe people's safety behaviour on beaches. This information, in combination with other existing beach safety programmes, such as the Surf Life Saving Association's Swim between the Flags campaign, will be used to produce the best material for a beach safety education programme. We will then trial this education programme and evaluate its effectiveness at two locations in NSW (Pacific Palms and Mollymook). This will then guide us towards a national educational campaign to improve water safety.

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